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Intervention RoundTable

The importance of the Saudi-UAE alliance: notes on military intervention, aid and investment

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Abstract

This contribution focuses on the shifts in the characteristics and forms of intervention by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in the Middle East and North Africa post the Arab Uprisings of 2011–2012. Although less commented upon, increasing military intervention by the two states has been accompanied by 'aid intervention', whereby financial assistance is utilised to secure foreign policy objectives. While scholarly work on intervention typically focuses on Western intervention and, to a lesser extent, the BRICS, this paper argues that Saudi-UAE intervention is reshaping the MENA region through a multi-pronged approach incorporating military campaigns and an alignment of foreign aid with private capital investment priorities. The direct military intervention in Yemen and aid intervention in Egypt are highlighted as illustrations of overarching trends of Saudi-UAE intervention.

Keywords: intervention; military intervention; aid intervention; Saudi Arabia; United Arab Emirates; Egypt; Yemen

As the cascading uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) in 2011–2012 challenged the existing neo-liberal authoritarian order, three member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) – Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Qatar – rapidly intervened to stabilise allies, undermine opponents and assert their power regionally. Saudi Arabia and the UAE had the closest alignment on geopolitical questions, leading or participating in a series of military campaigns (directly and indirectly) in Libya, Syria and,

most prominently, in Yemen. They also intervened within the GCC, supporting the regimes in Oman and Bahrain, invoking the Peninsula Shield Forces in the case of Bahrain to back King Hamad in suppressing protests against his rule. Although less commented upon, military intervention was accompanied by 'aid intervention', whereby financial assistance was utilised to secure foreign policy objectives, especially through aid packages to Egypt, Jordan, Morocco and Tunisia. Both the violence and scale of post-uprising interventions by a Saudi-UAE alliance makes scrutinising such intervention more urgent, particularly in the context of the escalating geopolitical rivalry, imbued with sectarian rhetoric, between Saudi-UAE on the one hand, and Iran on the other.

In spite of the centrality of such interventions across the MENA region, there is a lacuna in the literature on the dynamics of Saudi-UAE interventions. This gap is not surprising considering that the bulk of critical academic literature on military intervention has focused on Western intervention, critiquing conceptions of liberal peace and the 'responsibility to protect' doctrine.[1] Scholarship on the securitisation of development aid has also mainly critiqued European or North American aid regimes, focusing on the employment of aid for stabilisation purposes, especially following military occupations.[2] Academic work on non-Western aid intervention typically emphasises the BRICS,[3] largely overlooking the significance of GCC states, although they have successfully pushed for greater representation in multilateral organisations to coincide with their financial weight in aid agencies.[4] With some notable exceptions, few scholars have dealt with the GCC's role as an aid donor, especially in the post-Arab uprisings period.[5]

In the following sections, I focus on the dynamics of Saudi-UAE interventions, particularly direct military intervention in Yemen and aid intervention in Egypt, as illustrations of overarching trends. I make two main arguments.

First, that we must understand the multi-pronged approach of Saudi-UAE intervention, which incorporates military campaigns and an alignment of foreign aid with private capital investment priorities. And second, that this form of intervention cannot be extricated from the long-existing Saudi-UAE alliance with the United States as regional hegemon. This, in turn, challenges the binary distinction in the academic literature between Western and non-Western intervention.[6] Expanding the scope of our analysis to GCC states allows us to scrutinise interventions that heavily rely upon Western arms, as well as diplomatic support, to continue. It also illustrates the ways in which the preference for regionally organised interventions by multilateral institutions (e.g. United Nations Charter, Chapter VIII) has worked to legitimate such regional arrangements.

Certainly, Saudi-UAE interventions largely mirror the methods – both military and discursive tools – of US intervention in the region, underscoring the need to look beyond the internal politics of individual intervening nation states to consider internationalised hierarchies, whereby military equipment and techniques, models of counter-insurgency and approaches to the securitisation and neo-liberalisation of aid circulate across international and regional coalitions.

Norms of Saudi-UAE direct military intervention have been most stark in Yemen where the Saudi-led coalition engaged in military action in 2015, under the guise of protecting the democratic will of the Yemeni people against the Houthi insurgency, which the Saudi government claims is backed by Iran. There have been numerous reports of widespread human rights and international humanitarian law violations by the Saudi-led coalition, including systematic attacks on civilian targets and the utilisation of humanitarian aid for military purposes.[7] Yemen has largely become a test case for direct Saudi-led military intervention, as well as a showcase for its stockpiles of arms purchased largely from the US, UK and France.

According to the Stockholm International Peace and Research Institute (SIPRI), 'Saudi Arabia and the UAE were the 2nd and 4th largest arms importers during 2013–17 respectively', with exports to Saudi Arabia rising by 225 per cent, and 51 per cent to UAE.[8] Although there may be some limited public rebukes of the Saudi-led coalition from the US or European states, overall official support for military action continues apace. In cementing the alliance between the US and Saudi Arabia, the Trump administration has signed nearly US$ 110 billion worth of military deals with Saudi Arabia.[9] In response to a legal case brought by the Campaign Against Arms Trade in July 2017, the British High Court declared that arms exports to Saudi Arabia were lawful.[10] This underlines the reliance of the Saudi-UAE interventions on sustained external support, both military and diplomatic.

In conjunction with military intervention, aid has been central to the Saudi-UAE alliance, with both states emphasising their humanitarian donations and promising aid packages to secure alliances. As Cowen has argued, the 'humanitarian affect is a powerful feature of contemporary military missions'.[11] This is exemplified in the oft-quoted comment by Colin Powell describing aid agencies in Afghanistan at the time of the US invasion as a 'force multiplier' and an 'important part of our combat team'.[12] Understanding this, the UAE-Saudi alliance utilises development and humanitarian aid effectively, drawing heavily on discourses of Islamic charity. For example, while military attacks on Yemen escalated, both Saudi Arabia and the UAE continued to be the major humanitarian assistance donors, managing aid to areas under their control while enforcing a blockade on Houthi-controlled territories.[13] Increasingly, the Emirate of Dubai in the UAE is positioning itself as the regional logistics cluster for development and humanitarian aid supplies.[14] Spaces like Dubai International Humanitarian City, established as a free zone authority, host multiple United Nations (UN) agencies, including the World Food Programme which heads the UN Logistics Cluster.

The UAE, in particular, has been actively aligning its foreign aid with investment policies that increase the chances of UAE domestic capital groups entering regional markets, especially in the real-estate, agricultural and infrastructure sectors. In 2008, the government established the UAE Office for the Coordination of Foreign Aid (OCFA) as an umbrella for UAE-based charities and organisations, largely drawing upon expertise from UN agencies, hiring international staff, and introducing international modalities in its agencies. The majority of UAE overseas assistance is thus earmarked for development rather than humanitarian aid, the bulk of it in bilateral assistance to governments, including in-kind donations for commodities such as gas and oil. According to the UAE Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation: 'UAE foreign assistance will seek opportunities to work with the private sector, in particular, UAE-based companies, and to encourage them to trade with and invest in developing nations'.[15]

The case of UAE aid to Egypt is relevant as it encapsulates the tendency towards shaping and managing political outcomes after the uprisings, and stabilising investment spaces. Long before the ousting of President Hosni Mubarak, UAE domestic capital groups had close relations with his regime and their investments were prominent in the real-estate, agriculture, tourism and banking sectors.[16] While promising much aid following the uprisings to deal with Egypt's weak economic conditions, this was stalled with the elections of the Muslim Brotherhood, as Qatar assumed the role of main donor while both Saudi Arabia and the UAE feared the Brotherhood's overtures to Iran. The coup against the Brotherhood's President Mohamed Morsi ushered in former military general, and now president, Abdel Fattah el-Sisi to power. This was a clear reorientation of allegiance from Qatar to the Saudi-UAE alliance.

Thereafter, aid injections acted to prop up the Sisi regime and consolidate the military's power over governance and the economy. Since 2013, Egypt has been the highest

recipient of UAE foreign assistance, mainly in the form of commodity aid. In conjunction with aid, the UAE moved to open up the space for private sector investments in Egypt, creating the Egypt-UAE taskforce and commissioning 'Strategy&', a subsidiary of PricewaterhouseCoopers, to develop a plan for attracting private investment to Egypt. In 2014, the taskforce asked none other than Tony Blair to assist with advising Sisi on economic reform.[17] This taskforce led to the donors' conference sponsored by the UAE, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. Part of its recommendations was to secure better investment conditions, including changes to Egypt's investment law. UAE official aid thus worked in tandem with the investment interests of its private sector.

Saudi-UAE intervention in the MENA region (and beyond) therefore warrants closer scholarly scrutiny, especially as the overarching rivalry with Iran intensifies and international actors vie for regional dominance. In the coming period, reconstruction will be crucial in Syria, Yemen, Libya and Iraq. The Saudi-UAE alliance is gearing up to intervene in shaping such reconstruction agendas and to gain both political and economic influence in these states. This will take the shape of targeted aid packages, use and integration into their established logistics networks, and encouraging privatisation. Scholars of intervention, with the tendency to focus on Western intervention or on the BRICS, thus ignore these important Arab actors at their peril.

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Endnotes

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[2] Duffield, ‘Getting Savages to Fight Barbarians’; O’Dempsey et al., ‘Playing with Principles in an Era of Securitized Aid’.
[3] The BRICS acronym was originally used in a Goldman Sachs investor report to signal the growing economic weight of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa (added later). On BRICS and aid regimes see Rowlands, ‘Individual BRICS or a Collective Bloc?’; Bergamaschi et al., *South-South Cooperation Beyond the Myths*.
[4] Ulrichsen, ‘Small States with a Big Role’.
[5] Neumayer, ‘What Factors Determine the Allocation of Aid’; Villanger, ‘Arab Foreign Aid’; Isaac, ‘Explaining the Patterns of the Gulf Monarchies’; Young, ‘A New Politics of GCC Economic Statecraft’; Momani and Ennis, ‘Between Caution and Controversy’.
[6] Stuenkel, ‘The BRICS and the Future of R2P’; Averre and Davies, ‘Russia, Humanitarian Intervention and the Responsibility to Protect’.
[7] See UNSC, ‘Final Report of the Panel of Experts’; Amnesty International, ‘Mounting Evidence of High Civilian Toll’.
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[11] Cowen, *The Deadly Life of Logistics*, 143.
[12] Lischer, ‘Military Intervention and the Humanitarian’; Böhnke and Zürcher, ‘Aid, Minds and Hearts’.
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[15] UAE Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, ‘Summary of the UAE Policy’.
[16] Momani, ‘Shifting Gulf Arab Investments’.
[17] Milne, ‘Tony Blair to Advise Egypt President'.